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ABSTRACT

Five ethnographic researchers worked with five elementary school teachers to develop individualized research topics related to teaching in multiethnic classrooms. The teachers were familiar with the ethnographers, having participated in previous naturalistic studies in their newly desegregated schools. Subjects included two teachers from a predominantly white "back to basics" magnet school and three teachers in an extended learning program for gifted students at a school with 80 percent minority students. Ethnographers and teachers used research results obtained from previous studies to choose useful research topics: (1) differences in student responses to teacher's praise and reward behaviors according to ethnic identity; (2) underlying social and ethnic issues based on students' ethnic self-identification, self-expressed play choices, and bilingualism; (3) behavioral problems of three disruptive students; (4) student attitudes toward cooperative learning, peer relations, play choices, and perceived leaders; and (5) improvement of class management through new disciplinary procedures. The students' ethnic backgrounds were white, Hispanic, black, and Vietnamese. No attempt was made to generalize findings from one classroom to another, since the purpose of the study was to create an individualized partnership, between the observer and the observed, that can provide useful inservice training and evaluation. (FG)

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RESPONDING TO TEACHERS' CONCERNS WITH QUALITATIVE INQUIRY

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Responding to Teachers' Concerns
with Naturalistic Inquiry

ABSTRACT

After participating in an ethnographic study conducted by the Multi-Ethnic School Environments Project, five teachers were shown the findings and each worked with the investigators to generate a researchable topic about her classroom. The studies examined: (1) factors inhibiting student cooperation and leadership; (2) implementation and student reactions to a new disciplinary procedure; (3) the daily activities of three problem students; (4) the effects of teacher praise on minority and majority students, and (5) students' social categorization of ethnicity/race. After presenting the findings of the studies, the paper discusses the utility of small-scale qualitative inquiry, and applications for program evaluation, inservice and preservice training.

During my thirteen years of ethnographic research, most were spent championing one or another form of scientific orthodoxy to justify the legitimacy, the advantages and the purity of qualitative research. It strikes me as highly ironic that I find myself offering a paper which flies in the face of orthodoxies once so dear. Yet it is with a certain irreverent glee that I present the results of a methodologically risky endeavor, owing to such gratifying results obtained in the field.

The Multi-Ethnic School Environments Project was funded at Far West Laboratory for Educational Research and Development by the Desegregation Studies Unit of the National Institute of Education to examine teacher training needs in newly desegregated and multiethnic schools.* From 1978 through 1980 two rather conventional naturalistic studies were conducted in two newly desegregated school districts to establish the extent to which the goals of social integration were being fostered in classrooms (see references). Resources allowed us to continue observations in the spring of 1981 in the classrooms observed in the fall of 1980. Ostensibly we were interested in providing a "longitudinal" perspective on the classrooms to document how the teaching and social relations in the classroom evolved from the point at which case studies had frozen them in December.

We were not satisfied merely to take more general field notes and to let a year slip by before giving teachers feedback in the form of academic reports (which was the case with the first study). Since the ultimate goal of the

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project was to design training programs which would be useful in multiethnic schools, a fast turn-around time on analysis relevant to teacher concerns was a desirable goal. Hence the name, Responsive Follow-Up Investigations (RFU).

The original research design of the fall ethnographic study called for multiple analyses (after the completion of descriptive case studies) which would focus on the following topics of interest to the project: teacher planning, moral socialization, socioemotional development of students, and administrative issues. Over the spring, the trained ethnographers were to work in pairs (as they had in the field) to code data or cull anecdotal evidence from their transcribed fieldnotes. But with the case studies completed it was possible to have the ethnographers revisit the classrooms once or twice a week in the spring to carry out this new observational work.

Setting

The RFU study was conducted in an urban district in California undergoing its first year of voluntary desegregation to avoid mandatory action threatened by the courts. As such, it was a highly limited plan consisting of a mere four magnet programs and the transfer of fewer than two hundred students. Two elementary schools were designated back-to-basics magnets while two schools initiated extended learning programs for upper grade gifted and talented students. From the group of teachers studied in the fall ethnography, two volunteer teachers at one back-to-basics school (Shepherd School) and three at an extended extended learning program school (Whitman) were the subjects of the RFU study.

The Shepherd faculty was the oldest in the district and had strongly maintained traditional norms for classroom behavior and instructional content. The Whitman mini-magnet had hired three teachers from other schools in the district (in addition to one teacher selected from Whitman). Together they

developed a new curriculum including common activities for their four classes in an open space environment. The ethnic composition of these classrooms is given in TABLE 1.

TABLE 1

	White	Black	Hispanic	Asian
Shepherd School (80% white)				
Ms. Lollabrigida	17	1	9	2
Ms. Welch	19	1	6	1
Whitman School (80% minority)				
Ms. Easy	19	1	3	3
Ms. Polk	17	0	4	5
Ms. Brooks	18	0	3	4

The first step was to gain the teachers' interest and commitment. In private meetings with their assigned teachers, the ethnographers showed them sample transcriptions of fieldnotes and data reduction procedures. The teachers then read their case study and commented on the accuracy and fairness of the reporting. Next, the ethnographers and teachers discussed what researchable topic might be of interest to the teacher. The topic had to be at least implicitly related to issues of teaching multiethnic classrooms.

It should be added that a good deal of preparation of the ethnographers was required before these meetings. Strategies had to be planned for presenting negative findings without endangering teachers' willingness to participate in the new studies. Human relations and ethnographic skills are equally valuable

in the field. One ethnographer only would observe each classroom. Assignments were made to take best advantage of rapport developed during the fall study. For example, one ethnographer was paired with a teacher who had relied on him for emotional support during a personal crisis; another because she was perceived as less threatening than the other ethnographer who had observed one teacher's class. Note that the original ethnographic study attempted to maximize "objectivity" by training observers to only report behavioralized descriptions of the ongoing stream of events. By contrast, the RFU studies attempted to dig deeper by using the interpersonal interactions between observer and teacher and observer and student and to report incidents in a more selective fashion. Thus, the observers were accorded freedom that did not exist in the fall study.

The ethnographers had been painstakingly trained to purge themselves of their personal and disciplinary orientations to produce consistant and reliable fieldnotes in the fall study. For the RFU studies they were able to bring their individual training to bear, e.g., sociolinguistics, teacher supervision, anthropology.

As the research manager I met with each ethnographer to create a research design which was to be used to address the issue to be studied in a given classroom. These designs were certainly not new in conception, but unusual in that the ethnographers' experience with the classrooms and the teachers' areas of interest provided phenomena of interest. It was not necessary for there to be long term observations in order to assure the reliability and validity of these "mini" studies.

In discussing these investigations it is important to emphasize the conditions motivating the choice of research topic, the methods used and the results. The full reports are contained in MESE Report 81-15. My colleagues: Lawrence Rosenthal, Constance Leventhal, Edward Hootstein, John Mraz, and

Clifton Bowen, who conducted the observations and analyses, wrote the reports from which the following is drawn. All teacher names are pseudonyms.

Ms. Lollabrigida's Classroom: A Study of Ethnicity and Teacher Style

by Lawrence Rosenthal

CONDITIONS

Ms. Lollabrigida was a sixth grade teacher nearing retirement who ran a very traditional classroom in a back-to-basics magnet. She had an assimilationist perspective and believed that all her students responded well to her warm, caring but firm disposition. There was no attempt to acknowledge cultural differences or use multicultural materials.

RESEARCH FOCUS

The question arose whether or not the teacher's complimenting (the main form of positive rewards in the classroom) elicited differential responses depending on the ethnicity of the student. The ethnographer used the standard fieldnote technique of recording behaviors and talk during each incident of teacher praise--the situation in which the reward was given, the teacher's manner, and the student(s)' response.

RESULTS

No significant correlation was found between manner of reward or frequency of reward and ethnicity of student. The most signficiant finding was that the incidence of praise had decreased dramatically when compared to the rate recorded during the fall. Conversations with the teacher and students revealed that the teacher conceived of praise as a part of discipline and that the amount of praise or negative sanction naturally decreased as the year progressed as classroom management became routinized. The teacher spent proportionally more

of her time on instruction than on control moves. Students were aware that the atmosphere was "looser" but that they had to police themselves. Students expressed total indifference to ethnicity.

IMPLICATIONS

Ms. Lollabrigida believed there was no reason to adapt her teaching to accommodate desegregation. Her claim of "colorblindness" was corroborated by the RFU study. Yet the cultural homogeneity of the students must be mentioned. The five bused students were all middle class like the rest of the class and did not display any Chicano or black cultural or language characteristics. The teacher's methods were thus found to be as fair as she had believed. It remains a hypothetical question whether the same results would obtain from a more heterogeneous classroom.

Ms. Welch's Classroom: A Study of Ethnicity and Peer Relations

by Constance Leventhal

CONDITIONS

Ms. Welch was a fourth grade teacher in the same back-to-basics magnet school as Ms. Lollabrigida. Like her colleagues, she was a strict traditional teacher who emphasized individual seatwork. There was little opportunity for students to interact with each other during class. Ethnicity appeared to be irrelevant as a factor in peer relations in the classroom.

Since Ms. Welch did not think ethnicity important enough to deal with in class, the question was raised about the significance of ethnicity among the students.

RESEARCH FOCUS

Individual interviews were conducted with students to determine their ethnic identity (see TABLE 2) and awareness, the structure of social relationships and the extent of perceptions about bilingualism. The purpose of the interviews was to determine if there were issues which had not surfaced in public in the classroom. Sociograms were constructed based on students' expressed play choices.

RESULTS

As can be seen from the two sociograms (FIGURES 1 and 2) the boys and girls had very different peer relations. The boys were centralized with popular leaders and peripheral students. Ethnicity was not a factor in determining the position of a boy in the class. But a black and a Hispanic were the two most popular. Among the girls, there were for the most part triads of reciprocally selecting friends which intersected to include all the girls except an NES Tonganese girl and an ostracized white girl. There was exclusivity among the girls as one triad of Hispanic girls made speaking Spanish a defining characteristic of acceptability.

Very few students were able to identify the ethnicity of peers other than their close friends. Surprisingly, only one student pointed out a black student! Self-reports of ethnicity for these students are given below:

TABLE 2

Ethnic identification
(Self-Report)

Ethnicity	Girls	Boys
American-European-White	6	5
American/Vietnamese		1
American/Hispanic-Mexican	1	
American/Hispanic-Puerto Rican		1
Hispanic-Mexican	5	
Black		1
Black/indicates no identification	1	
Pacific Island-Tonga	1	

In terms of language attitudes it has been mentioned that there was one triad of ethnically exclusive Hispanic girls. They made fun of other girls who could not speak Spanish. (Of nine Hispanics only one was bilingual, five claimed they spoke a little Spanish, and three spoke none.)

The non-English speaking girl from Tonga had been in the class for two months yet students hadn't sorted out where she was from or what language she spoke. They tried speaking Spanish to her and lost interest. Only two students mentioned her when asked what languages were spoken in the classroom.

It was clear that students did not have a conception of the ethnic dimensions of the class as a whole and that the teacher had in no way helped to clarify their misconstruals of the ethnic identity of their classmates. This investigation runs counter to the "doll identification" studies which contend that by the age of four students were negatively sensitized to black skin color.

FIGURE 1

BOY'S NETWORK PATTERN OF

RECIPROCAL CHOICE

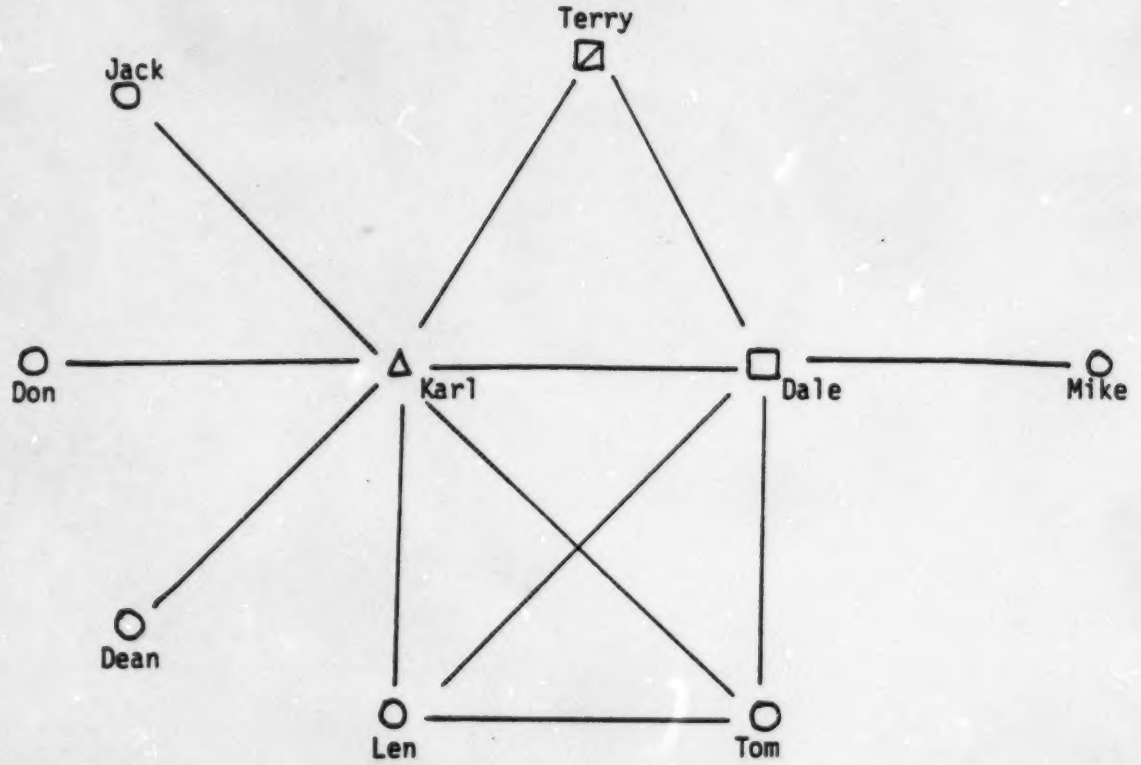
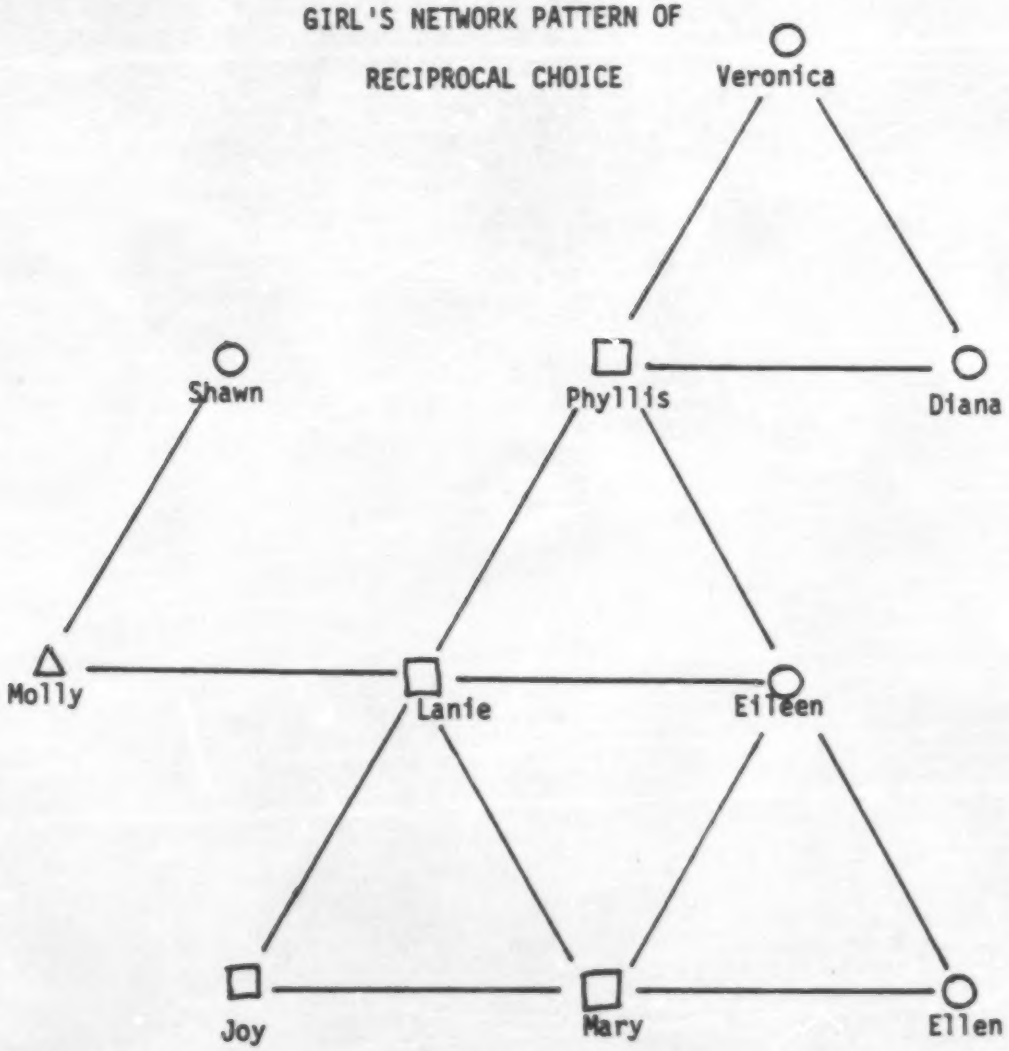


FIGURE 2

GIRL'S NETWORK PATTERN OF RECIPROCAL CHOICE



Black
White
Hispanic-Mexican
Pacific Island-Tonga
Magnet Program

June

Laura

Ms. Easy's Classroom: Case Histories of Student Adjustment Problems

by Clifton Bowen

CONDITIONS

Ms. Easy was a fifth grade teacher in the open space Extended Learning Program mini-magnet. She encouraged group discussion and cooperative learning activities as well as "magic circle" affective education. She was more concerned with seeing students as individuals than emphasizing ethnic differences. Her classroom weas orderly and there was a good deal of informal interaction with her students.

RESEARCH FOCUS

Ms. Easy was concerned about three students who were having problems adjusting to the classroom. They both had academic problems and two of the three were socially ostracized. Ms. Easy wanted ethnographic descriptions of the students' behavior so she could examine the effectiveness of her own strategies for dealing with them. The observer took fieldnotes on one student at a time when they were engaged in conversations with the teacher, interacting with other students or when there were disruptions of the class. Near the end of the school year the ethnographer arranged for several of the more effective management practices and affective education techniques to be videotaped for feedback to the teacher.

RESULTS

While it would not be possible to summarize here the nature of these student adjustment problems and the information gathered about their behavior it is important to note that Ms. Easy found the information valuable. She wanted to show field notes to parents to document students behavioral problems. We declined over concerns of confidentiality. Ms. Easy's monitoring of classroom

activities was so effective that in only one of the three cases did the ethnographer document that the teacher had wrongly interpreted the effect of her management decisions on a student's behavior. Particularly in open space classrooms it may be useful for an observer to provide a teacher with information about student interaction and patterns of off-task behavior. The ethnographer and Ms. Easy conversed each observation day about the students' behavior and the teacher found this verbal feedback to be useful as well. The videotaping proved successful enough that the teacher agreed to narrate voice over commentary to explain her techniques.

Ms. Polk's Classroom: A Study of Cooperative Learning Environments, Play Choices and Leadership

by John Mraz

CONDITIONS

Ms. Polk taught the fourth grade in the ELP mini-magnet. She was unhappy about teaching in the noise and confusion of an open space (all four classes were in an unpartitioned room). Her instruction was more traditional than Ms. Easy and Ms. McCarthy and she felt from her experience teaching minorities that individual differences rather than ethnicity were more important for a teacher to deal with. She noted that cooperative learning activities were useful for dealing with non-native English speakers in the class.

RESEARCH FOCUS

The teacher was curious about the fact that there were no real leaders in the classroom and also wanted to know about the students' attitudes toward cooperative learning experiences. A questionnaire was developed which asked students about these topics and allowed for the construction of sociograms about play choices, cooperative learning choices and perceived leaders (see FIGURE 3).

FIGURE 3

QUESTIONNAIRE

1. Which of the kids in the class do you like to play with most?
2. Who is your best friend in this class?
3. Who would you ask to help you with math problems?
4. Who would you ask to help you with reading and spelling problems?
5. Who do you think are the leaders in this class?
6. What do the leaders do that makes them be leaders?
7. Do you like to work alone or with other kids?
8. Do you like to work with other kids in math? with who?
9. Do you like to work with other kids in art, drama, music? with who?

   Who did you work with on the puppet show?

   Did you choose to work with them?

   Did you like to work with them?
10. Do you like to work with other kids in reading and spelling/writing? with who?
11. If you had a chance to work with other kids, what kind of a project or subject would you like to work on?
12. What kind of project or subject would you rather work on by yourself?
13. Do you work with other kids more or less than you did in school last year?
14. Would you prefer to work with other kids more or less than you do this year?
15. If you could pick three kids to work with in the class, who would they be?

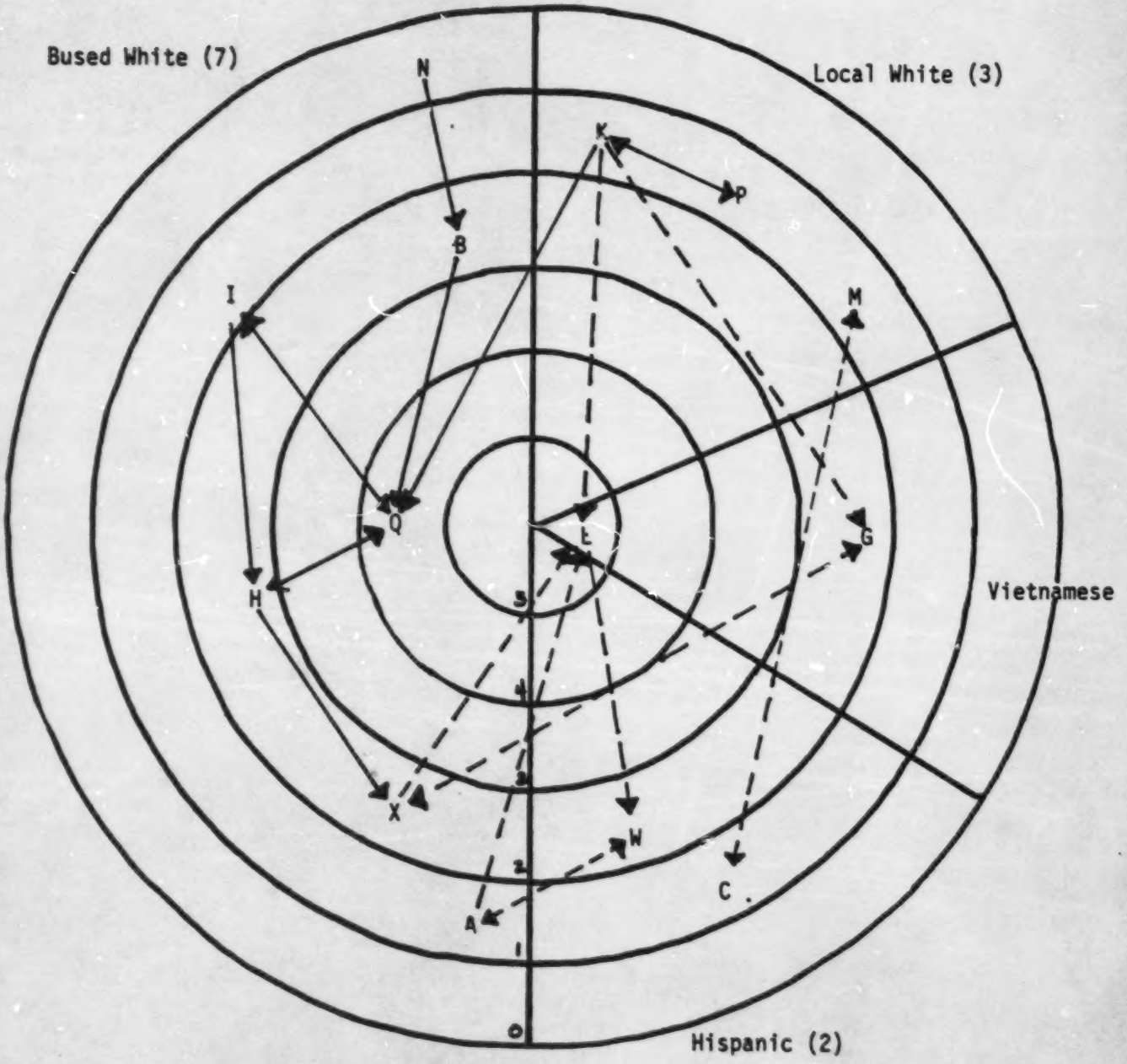
RESULTS

Play choices for both boys and girls tended to be same ethnic for bused whites and cross ethnic for local whites and minorities (see FIGURES 4 and 5). Bused whites preferred working alone or cooperative work depending on the subject matter. Minorities and to a lesser extent non-bused whites greatly preferred cooperative work.

Despite the ethnic separation in friendship patterns, two Vietnamese boys were perceived as class leaders. These students were also the most popular. Interestingly, the Vietnamese excelled in math and the bused whites indicated more interest in cooperative work in math. It was also apparent that as the teacher reduced the amount of cooperative work (to try to reduce classroom noise) she foreclosed on the possibility of encouraging student leadership.

FIGURE 4

BOYS: PLAY CHOICES

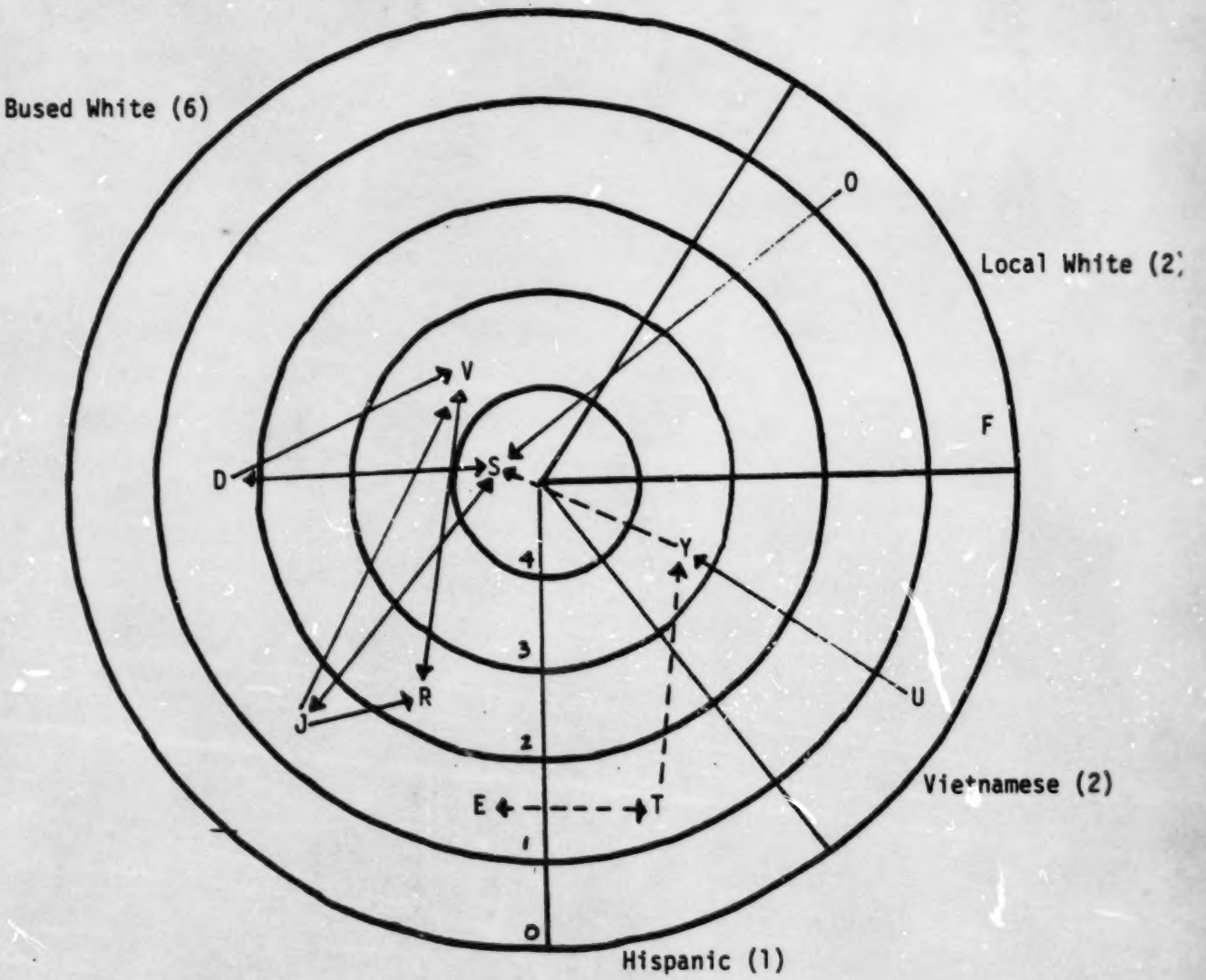


Cross-ethnic ------

Same ethnic _____

FIGURE 5

GIRLS: PLAY CHOICES



Cross-ethnic ------

Same ethnic _____

Ms. Brooks' Classroom: A Study of Classroom Management Practices

by Edward Hootstein

CONDITIONS

Ms. Brooks was a fourth-fifth grade teacher at the Extended Learning Program Magnet. She was returning to teaching after an absence of several years and was somewhat uncertain about her classroom management practices. Her instructional style was less innovative than Ms. Easy or Ms. McCarthy, but featured more cooperative work than Ms. Polk.

RESEARCH FOCUS

Disruptive behavior of several boys in the class (specifically, five bused whites) caused interruptions, prevented discussions and contributed to hurried lessons. The teacher was given a list of six recommendations for improving classroom management and climate. The investigation consisted of: (1) collecting qualitative fieldnotes on the effects of Ms. Brooks' newly implemented classroom management system, (2) interviewing all students about their perceptions of the teacher's control of the classroom and about who they perceived to be troublemakers, (see FIGURE 6 for interview instrument), (3) videotaping group discussions with (a) the troublemakers (b) the minority students (c) the other white students, near the end of the school year.

RESULTS

Classroom management improved substantially as a result of the intervention strategy. However, toward the end of the year the teacher was so involved with science and book fairs, coordinating special projects and field trips that she stopped consistently enforcing her disciplinary procedures. Students reported that the teacher became more lax as time passed.

FIGURE 6

CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT INTERVIEW

Name_____

Date_____

1. During the past month Ms. Brooks has tried harder to improve student behavior when you are seated in a circle. Have you noticed any changes in student behavior during her recent efforts? If no, why do you think there have been no changes?

2. The teacher has done these things to improve circle behavior:
   a. discussed the importance of cooperation and appropriate behavior.
   b. developed rules which were discussed and posted.
   c. developed writing assignments as punishments for those who break the rules.

   Which of these do you believe is most important in improving circle behavior?_____ Which is the least important?_____ Comment.

3. Do you think that Ms. Brooks is too strict, just right, or not strict enough during circle time?_____ Comment.

4. If you were the teacher of this class, what changes would you make to improve circle behavior?

5. Who are the most serious troublemakers? Please rank them in order: 1. Most serious troublemaker; 2. second most serious troublemaker; and 3. third most serious troublemaker.

   1.
   2.
   3.

6. Describe your feelings when Ms. Brooks interrupts a lesson to scold a troublemaker.

7. There are 6 groups of students in your classroom--white boys and girls, Vietnamese boys and girls, Mexican boys and girls. Is it strange to you that the most serious troublemakers are all white boys? Comment.

8. What differences do you see between bused and nonbused students?

Most students, especially minority students believed that rules were needed and that rules were the most important factor in improving circle behavior. Students were highly convergent in identifying troublemakers. Reactions to the teachers' poor management varied: Vietnamese students felt sorry for Ms. Brooks, Hispanics felt angry, troublemakers expressed self-disgust. These attitudes were clearly apparent to the teacher upon viewing the videotapes of the group discussions. Intervention had been successful in improving learning time and classroom climate until Ms. Brooks slacked off because of other pressures.

Implications of the RFU Studies

The traditional application of naturalistic inquiry (ethnography, case studies, clinical profiles, ethological description) in educational research has been to examine the behavioral "process" which gets lost in quantitative assessments of program activity outcomes. The qualitative researchers' main worry is to overcome the limits small sample size and "soft" outcome measures place on generalizability and policy relevance. By contrast, the RFU studies, as applied research, were designed to provide feedback to an audience of specific pratitioners.

Each of the RFU studies provided the research project with additional insight into the workings of new desegregated classrooms. No attempt was made to generalize the findings from one classroom to others, yet the results served two important purposes. First, it allowed the project to move past the barrier of observer/observed to work in partnership with teachers to explore issues of interest to them. Observers informally discussed their impressions, reflections and data during their visits to the classroom. With the exception of Ms. Lollabrigida's classroom (where little was uncovered that was revealing to the

teacher or added to our understanding of the process of assimilation) all the teachers found the experience directly beneficial in understanding and/or improving their classrooms.

Second, the RFU studies demonstrated ways that teacher supervisors, with minimal cost and time, can provide useful inservice training or evaluation.

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